



LA CRIÉE
CENTRE D'ART
CONTEMPORAIN
RENNES - F

PRESS PACK

THE SUN IS MY ONLY ALLY

CHARBEL-JOSEPH
H. BOUTROS

from 24 September to 23 December 2022

Friday 23 September 2022, 6:30 p.m.
press visits: 2 p.m.
opening: 6:30 p.m.

La Criée centre for contemporary art
place Honoré Commeurec
Rennes
la-crie.org

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ALSO IN RENNES

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THE SUN IS MY ONLY ALLY

CHARBEL-JOSEPH H. BOUTROS

Exhibition from 24 September to 23 December 2022

After rising in the East (at Home Works 8/Beirut Art Center in 2019), then finding its zenith in the North (at S.M.A.K in Ghent in 2020), Charbel-joseph H. Boutros's exhibition *The Sun Is My Only Ally* is completing its trajectory in the West, at La Criée Centre for Contemporary Art. Like the sun. For Rennes, Boutros is bringing together a group of poetically abstract works forming a geographic entity – in which private stories are interwoven with those of art, place and the course of history, time present with traces of the past and the components of reality with the alchemy of dreams.

Rennes' variation on *The Sun Is My Only Ally* unfolds around a central space that embraces and extends the previous exhibitions, and satellite spaces that echo our changing loves and our recurring nightly dreams. In this setting the artist's works give tangible expression to mostly fleeting or elusive physical, mental and emotional perceptions.

«A work of art is not just a picture hung on a wall or a sculpture installed in an exhibition. An artwork has to take into account the entirety of its surrounding context. For me, an exhibition is a magical place, a new geography that reformulates reality. It also reformulates and re-channels the art world itself: everything becomes raw material, from the curator of the exhibition to the first visitor who comes in, to the sun that illuminates it, to the museum itself and the art market.»*

The earlier versions of the exhibition, in Beirut and Ghent, fell victim to the political and health crises that are shaping our present: the former was open only on the evening of the vernissage, the latter had to close after a month, before being extended. As for La Criée, the exhibition was postponed for a year. So the event comes echoing with whiffs of history and of the long reveries that made waiting bearable.

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros: What do you see as an ideal exhibition?

Sophie Kaplan: I would say, an exhibition simultaneously containing profound ideas and the experiencing of beauty.

CJHB: There's a sentence coming back to me – I've forgotten the author's name – that runs, «When the mystery is too overwhelming, you don't dare disobey.» «I believe that a work of art should create this mystery and the same goes for an exhibition... That's how I see an «ideal» exhibition: it's an exhibition that offers the visitor a new reality, an alternative to reality... I like to think of an exhibition as a new geography obeying its own laws. This new geography/exhibition should be an intense poetic immersion for the visitor. This encounter should be capable of changing the course of things in someone's life.

SK: I share with you this idea – this conviction, this utopianism – of an exhibition that can change the life of the person who passes through it as much as he or she is permeated by it. An exhibition that would change their life in the sense that it would change their way of looking and feeling. In the sense that it would broaden beauty's ambit.*

With *The Sun Is My Only Ally*, Charbel-joseph H. Boutros proposes a subtle geography which makes tangible the different strata that enrich our dreams, together with our lives as they walk, collide, halt and go their way.

* Catalogue: *The Sun Is My Only Ally*, 2022
The exhibition is accompanied by the artist's first monograph, jointly prepared by S.M.A.K Ghent and La Criée centre for contemporary art, and published by Mousse Publishing. It includes texts by Ismaïl Bahri, Jean Marie Gallais, Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, Sophie Kaplan, Mouna Mekouar, Stéphanie Saadé, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi and Philippe Van Cauteren.

—
curator: Sophie Kaplan
production: La Criée centre for contemporary art

Exhibited works

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros

***Catwalk*, 2019-2022**

Painted metallic structure, painted wood,
museum staff exhibition, performance
Throughout the duration of the exhibition,
the museum team will walk only on the
platform to navigate this exhibition room,
never touching the ground.

production: La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes
courtesy the artist, Grey Noise, Dubai; Jaqueline Martins
Gallery, São Paulo and Brussels; Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

***Three songs, three exhibitions*, 2022**

three buzuks, metal support, carpet, video,
sound, three exposures

A luthier was asked to create three specific
buzuks, each conceived as a portrait of an
exhibition done by the artist. On these buzuks,
used only once, the luthier played a melody,
a farewell theme for every single past show.

production: La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes
courtesy the artist and Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

***I guess that dreams are always there*, 2022**

wooden shelf, pillow, duvet

production: La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes
courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

***Neon light*, 2022**

La Criée's neon light, votive candle wax,
exhibition

production: La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes
courtesy the artist and Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

***The Exhibition Between Us*, 2019-2022**

two granite slabs, sculptor, two visitors,
exhibition

The names of the first and last visitors
to witness the exhibition are to be carved
on two awaiting granite slabs. The first visitor's
name will be engraved during the opening
event, and the name of the last one to visit
on the last day will be engraved the moment
the exhibition ends.

production: La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes
courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

***An exhibition around your neck*, 2022**

necklace, marble cubes

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai; Jaqueline Martins
Gallery, São Paulo and Brussels

***Life variation #3, the marble, the ring and the continents*, 2022**

5 stele from Brazil, Lebanon, France, Belgium
and Greece, pieces of a broken ring, gravel,
metal structure, displacement, love, hopes,
exhibition

courtesy the artist and Jaqueline Martins Gallery, São Paulo
and Brussels

***The Booth, The Gallerist, and The Mausoleum*, 2021**

wood, cardboard, votive candle wax, acrylic
paint, ashes of press releases, wishes, hopes,
metallic structure, carpet, iPad stand, iPad, video
file (10 min.), desert sand, art fair booth, gallerist,
contract, death

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

***Night Cartography #3*, 2016-2019**

Airplane sleeping mask, votive candle wax,
dreams, wishes (ongoing series)

Wax from votive candles (stolen from a church
in the Lebanese mountains) is poured on an
airplane sleeping mask, used by the artist at
night for several months.

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

***Days Under Their Own Sun*, 2013-2018**

calendar paper, sun

Each day of a calendar is exposed to its own
sun, from sunrise until sunset.

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Exhibited works

Untouched Marble, 2014

Carrara marble cubes, metallic structure, bicycle

A marble cube, previously untouched by humans, was extracted from a quarry and accompanied the artist in his everyday actions for one month – in his studio, at the bar or cinema, on his bicycle, in his bed. Here, the stone is exhibited close to an identical one not charged with any such intimate experience.

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Life variation #2, 2019-2020

concrete block, watermelon seeds

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Night archive, 2020

cotton cover, *Night Cartography#2* (lead and spray acrylic on white paper, frame), heat, obscurity

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Amitié, 2018

Stan Smith shoes

Two new shoes from the same pair are separated. The left one was worn by the artist during his trips in Europe for six months.

The right one was worn by his friends in Beirut.

The two shoes are reunited for the exhibition.

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Three Abstractions on Three Histories, 2016

three white shirts, metallic structure

Three shirts, apparently similar, hang high from the ground. They seem to belong to the same person, but in reality, one belonged to the artist's grandfather, the second to his father, and the third to the artist. Each refers to a particular time and contains a part of Lebanese history.

collection: Laurent Fiévet, Paris

If Close to the Sun a Drop May Fall, 2019-2020

album tape, votive candle wax, metallic structure

collection: S.M.A.K., Ghent

Mon amour, 2012-2017

supermarket receipt, marker

courtesy the artist and Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

2m Long of Isolated Darkness, 2017-2020

isolation foam, empty metallic tube, darkness

courtesy the artist and Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

No Light In White Light, 2014

vidéo, 11 min

A Syriac priest starts reading the Genesis in Aramaic—a dead language—a few minutes before nightfall in a forest in Mount Lebanon. As the light gets dimmer, the reading becomes more and more difficult. The priest stops reading when the Aramaic words fade into the night become invisible in the night. courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

DRINK EUROPA (Boire l'Europe), 2013

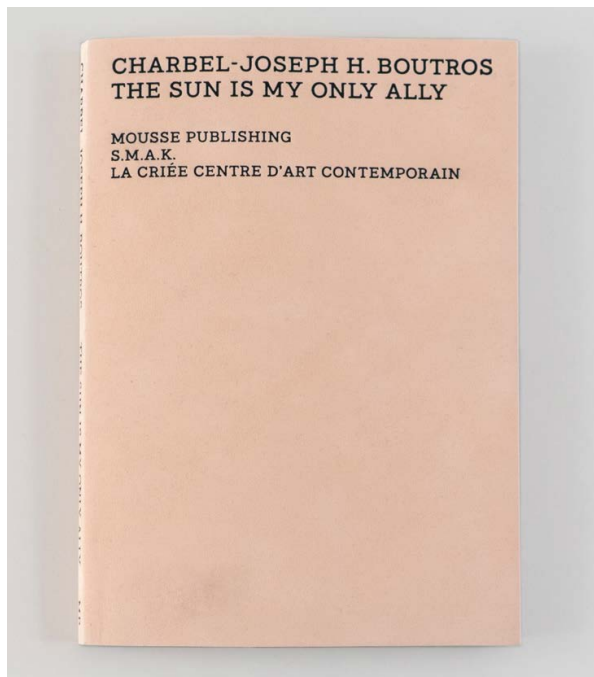
drinking glass, 27 European mineral waters, side table

This glass is filled with water composed of equal quantities of 27 mineral waters from the 27 European countries

courtesy the artist and la galerie Vera Cortês, Lisbon

Monography

The Sun Is My Only Ally



The essence of Charbel-joseph H. Boutros' practice is sculpting invisibility and treating it as a material. In his oeuvre, invisibility subtly weaves intimate, geographical, and political narratives, re-questioning the role of an overtly engaged artist from the Middle East and finding poetic lines extending beyond the realm of existing speculations and realities. For Boutros, each exhibition is a new geography that reformulates reality.

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design: Matteo Gualandris (Mousse)

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Green Flashes

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Meeting

Chabel-joseph H. Boutros
in conversation with the artist

Ismaïl Bahri

Saturday 24 September 2022, 3 p.m.

Ismaïl Bahri is artiste, he has already exposed La Criée for *Incorporated!* the 5th edition of Biennial of contemporary art, Rennes, 2016.

Chabel-joseph H. Boutros and Ismaïl Bahri are friends and share a sensibility of art, we understand it through the text that Ismaïl Bahri wrote for the catalog *My Sun Is My Only Ally*.

Ismaïl Bahri

born in 1978 in Tunis, lives and works between Paris and Tunis.

Concert

Charbel Haber

Tuesday 15 November 2022, 8 pm

One day in the future, will take place the last art exhibition.

Charbel-Joseph H. Boutros invites the musician Charbel Haber to compose a tribute concert for this last exhibition to come.

Charbel Haber is a guitarist, composer and electronic experimenter very active on the Lebanese scene.

Based in Beirut, he is co-founder of the post-punk band Scrambled Eggs. He is also very involved in the improvised music scene (member of Musique Improvisée Libre au Liban, BAO trio, Moukhtabar Ensemble, Grendizer Trio) and is at the initiative of the labels Those Kids Must Choke and Johnny Kafta's Kids Menu.

In 2013, he was invited to La Criée by the artist Ziad Antar for a concert before the opening of the exhibition Safe Sounds

Rendez-vous

—

Descriptive and tactile visit

Friday 14 October 2022, 5:30 pm

The visit proposes a sensitive approach to the works, through touch, sound perception of the space and a dialogue between the participants' perceptions and the objective description of the elements.

Meditative tour with Jennifer Aujame

Wednesday 7 December 2022, 7 pm

Through a guided meditation, Yogi artist and director Jennifer Aujame shares her reading of the works of artist Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, between dream and consciousness.

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, view of the exhibition *The Sun Is My Only Ally*, S.M.A.K., Ghent
courtesy the artist, Grey Noise, Dubai; Jaqueline Martins Gallery, São Paulo and Brussels; Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon
photo: Dirk Pauwels

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, Home Works 8, Beirut Art Center, Lebanon

courtesy the artiste, Home Works 8 Ashkal Alwan and Grey Noise, Dubai

photo: Stéphanie Saadé

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *Life variation #3, the marble the ring and the continents*, 2022
5 stele from Brazil, Lebanon, France, Belgium and Greece, pieces of a broken ring, gravel,
metal structure, displacement, love, hopes, exhibition
courtesy the artist and Jaqueline Martins Gallery, São Paulo and Brussels
photo : graysc

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *Three songs, three exhibitions*, 2022

video capture

production: La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes

courtesy the artist and Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *If Close to the Sun a Drop May Fall*, 2019-2020

album tape, votive candle wax, metallic structure

collection: S.M.A.K., Ghent – photo: Dirk Pauwels

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *If Close to the Sun a Drop May Fall*, 2019-2020

album tape, votive candle wax, metallic structure

collection: S.M.A.K., Ghent

***I Guess That Dreams Are Always There*, 2014**

wooden shelf, pillow, duvet

courtesy the artist, S.M.A.K., Ghent and Grey Noise, Dubai

***DRINK EUROPA (Boire l'Europe)*, 2013**

drinking glass, 27 European mineral waters, side table

courtesy the artist, S.M.A.K., Ghent, Grey Noise, Dubai, Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

photo: Dirk Pauwels

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *Three Abstractions on Three Histories*, 2016

three white shirts, metallic structure

courtesy the artist, S.M.A.K. Ghent, collection: Laurent Fiévet, Paris– photo: Dirk Pauwels

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *Night Cartography #3*, 2017

Airplane sleeping mask, votive candle wax, dreams, wishes (ongoing series)

courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai – photo: Benoît Mauras

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *Mon amour*, 2012-2017
supermarket receipt, marker
courtesy the artist and Galeria Vera Cortês, Lisbon

Visual for press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *Life variation #2*, 2019-2020

concrete block, watermelon seeds

courtesy the artist, S.M.A.K. Ghent and Grey Noise, Dubai

photo: Dirk Pauwels



Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, *The Booth, The Gallerist and The Mausoleum*, 2021

wood, cardboard, votive candle wax, acrylic paint, ashes of press releases, wishes, hopes, metallic structure, carpet, iPad stand, iPad, video file (10 min.), desert sand, art fair booth, gallerist, contract, death

courtesy the artist, Marres, Maastricht and Grey Noise, Dubai

photo: Gert Jan Van Rooij

Biography

CHARBEL-JOSEPH H. BOUTROS

b. 1981, Lebanon

Lives and works between Beirut and Paris.

In his work invisibility is charged with intimate, geographical and historical layers, finding poetic lines that extend beyond the realm of existing speculations and realities. Being born amidst the Lebanese conflict, his art is not engaged in an explicit political and historical reflection, but is more accurately haunted by the said political and historical reflection.

H. Boutros was a resident at The Pavillon, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France and was a researcher at Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, The Netherlands. His first extensive institutional exhibition in Europe, *The Sun Is My Only Ally* was recently shown at S.M.A.K. Museum, Ghent.

His work has been shown internationally at: The 12th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey / Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France / Punta della Dogana, Venice, Italy / Centre Pompidou - Metz, France / S.M.A.K. Museum, Gent, Belgium / Home Works 8, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut / CCS Bard College, New York, USA / 3rd Bahia Biennial, Salvador, Brazil / 1st Yinchuan Biennale, Yinchuan, China / CCA, Warsaw, Poland / More Konzeption Conception Now, Morsbroich Museum, Leverkusen, Germany / Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE / Beirut Art Center, Beirut, Lebanon / La Criée centre for contemporary art, France / Marres, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022

The Sun Is My Only Ally, La Criée centre for contemporary art, Rennes, France

Untitled until now, Galeria Jaqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

2021

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros: The Work and It's Periphery, Grey Noise, Dubai

Intimate geographies, with Stéphanie Saadé, corator: Valentijn Byvanck Marres, Maastricht, The Netherlands

2020

The Sun Is My Only Ally, S.M.A.K Ghent, Belgium

2019

Home Works 8 / Ashkal Alwan, Beirut Art Center, Lebanon

Condo Mexico City hosted by LABOR, Mexico City

The gallerist, the letter and the garden, Galeria Jaqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

When 2 artists meet, with Stéphanie Saadé, curator : Arnisa Zeqo, Rongwrong, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2018

Condo Mexico City, Galeria Jaqueline Martins, hosted by Proyecto Paralelo, Mexico

My iPhone fell inside my left warm shoe, UMA LULIK, Lisbon, Portugal

Galerie De Multiples, Paris, France

2016

FIAC, Paris, France with Grey Noise, Dubai

I stood in the middle of the strait of Gibraltar and I dropped my left tear in the Atlantic ocean, and my right tear in the Mediterranean sea, Grey Noise, Dubai

Sueur d'Etoile, Charbel-joseph H. Boutros and Marie-Agnès Gillot, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

2014

Forgotten Lands, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

I guess that dreams are always there, Grey Noise, Dubai

LISTE, Basel, Switzerland with Grey Noise, Dubai

With Stéphanie Saadé, Grey Noise, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022

Art Brussels, Belgium

2021

HOW WILL IT END?, Boghossian Foundation-Villa Empain, Brussels, Belgium

Paris Internationale, 186, Avenue Victor Hugo, Paris, France

AJAR curated by Mouna Mekouar, Galerie Hubert

Biography

Winter, Vienna, Austria

Intimate Geographies, Marres, House for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht, Netherlands
2020

Oblique Strategies curated by Voix Off, Martine Aboucaya Gallery, France

Exposition imaginaire, Beaux Arts magazine, curated: Jean de Loisy

2019

When Two Artists Meet, Ephemeral Evidence Season 1, curated by Arnica Zeqo, Rongwrong, Amsterdam, Netherlands

En Chemin, curated by Katell Jaffres, Musée d'Art de Nantes, France,

Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands, curated by Sophie Kaplan, La Criée centre for contemporary art, France

Luogo e Segni, curated by Martin Bethenod and Mouna Mekouar, Punta della Dogana, Venice, Italy

The Collection (1) | Highlights for a Future, S.M.A.K, Gent, Belgium

2018

CONDO, Unit Athens at The Breeder, Athens Greece

Trust, The New acquisitions by the S.M.A.K. Museum Gent, Les Brasseurs, Liege, Belgium, curated by Philippe van Cauteren

Peindre la nuit, Curated by Jean-Marie Gallais, Centre Pompidou – Metz, France

Vertiges, Curated by Léa Bismuth, Lab Labanque art center, Béthune, France

LISTE, Basel, Switzerland with Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

So long ago it feels like the memory of someone else, Curated by Andrew Hubbard, CCS BARD College, New York City

Especular, curated by Mirtes Martins de Oliveira and Hena Lee, Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

2017

Night was paper and we were ink, curated by Karim Sultan and Mandy Merzaban, Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

Reprise and Repetition, curated by the Archiv der avantgarden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, SKD Museum, Dresden, Germany

Psychosculptural Aesthetics, curated by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk, Galerie Rianne Groen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Between Two Rounds of Fire, The Exile of the Sea, curated by Karim Sultan, American University Museum, Kaizen Arts Center, Washington, USA

Invitation Without Exhibition, curated by Collectif Voix Off, Galerie Martine Aboucaya, Paris, France

NO TO THE INVASION : BREAKDOWNS AND SIDE EFFECTS, curated by Fawz Kabra, CCS Bard College Galleries, New York, USA

Ghosting of beings and worlds, Grey Noise, Dubai

A GENTIL CARIOCA, curated by Ricardo Sardenberg, Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

100 chefs-d'œuvre de l'art modern et contemporain arabe, curated by Philippe van Cauteren and Karim Sultan with the Barjeel Art Foundation, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, France

2016

La Panacée, centre d'art contemporain, curated by Johana Carrier and Joana Neves, Montpellier, France

For an Image, Faster Than Light, curated by Bose Krishnamachari, Yinchuan Biennial, Yinchuan, China

Always a knit of identity, always distinction, Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

ARTBO, Bogotá, Colombia, with Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

LISTE, Basel, Switzerland with Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

Imprisoned, Jailbreak, Imprisoned, Jailbreak, Ayoama Meguro, Tokyo, Japan

ARCOMadrid, Madrid, Spain, with Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

Home Ground, Barjeel Art Foundation, Maraya art center, Sharjah, UAE

Biography

Lá où commence le jour, curated by Marc Donnadiou, LAM – Museum Of Modern And Contemporary Art, Lille Metropole, France

Fragements d'amour, curated by Léa Bismuth, CAC Alfortville, Paris, France

Walls and Margins, Barjeel Art Foundation, Maraya Art Center, Sharjah, UAE

But even if I cannot see the sun, Grey Noise, Dubai 2015

Prosopopées, 104, Paris, France

ARTBO, Bogotá, Colombia, with Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

Frieze Art Fair | Focus, London, UK with Grey Noise, Dubai

KURZ / DUST – Curated by Ana Ptak and cocurator Amanda Abi Khalil, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland

Home Ground, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada

I spy with my little eye: An emerging generation of Beirut artists, curated by Sam Bardaouil and till fellrath, Mosaic Rooms, London, UK and Casa Árabe, Cordoba, Spain and Casa Árabe, Madrid, Spain

Betwixt & Between, Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Danse Perdue, performance with Adrien Couvez, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

The way of the rabbit, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

Marres, Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Sun Romance and Destruction, Galerie Anne Barrault, Paris, France

More Konception Conception now, Morsbroich Museum, Laverkusen, Germany

Adam, Eve and the Devil, curated by Ardi Poels, Marres – Art Center, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Sun, Romance and Destruction, Galerie Anne Barrault, Paris, France

2014

Onomichi Museum, Hiroshima, Japan

Todays Art Festival, The Hague, The Netherlands

Blanche ou l'oubli, Galerie Alberta Pane, Paris, France

Galeria Jacqueline Martins, São Paulo, Brazil

La Conservera Centro de Arte Contemporanea, Ceutí, Spain

Is everything Northeast?, 3rd Bahia Biennale, Salvador, Brazil

Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Something has slightly changed (performance), Goethe Institute, Salvador, Brazil

Jan van Eyck Open, Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, The Netherlands

2013

The space between us, Paris, France, curated by Ana Iwataki

Reform and Reinvention, MAM – Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Salvador, Brazil

Destiny, Galerie Anne Barrault, Paris, France

Intangible experiences, arrangements and manoeuvres, Grey Noise, Dubai

A Journey, Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, Lebanon

We hesitated between arrangements, modulations and manoeuvres, Minus 5, Beirut, Lebanon

Crisis Practice #2, Workshop Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon

JVE, Jan van Eyck, Maastricht, The Netherlands 2011

'Untitled' Abstraction, curated by Ardiano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffmann, 12th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey

Filming The Dark (lecture-performance), FAAP, São Paulo, Brazil

2010

Exposure 2010, Beirut Art Center, Beirut, Lebanon

Open Exhibition from 09/09/09 to destruction, Permanent Exhibition, Amrieh, Lebanon

Bibliography

MONOGRAPHY

The Sun Is My Only Ally, 2022

The exhibition is accompanied by the artist's first monograph, jointly prepared by S.M.A.K Ghent and La Criée centre for contemporary art, and published by Mousse Publishing. It includes texts by Ismaïl Bahri, Jean Marie Gallais, Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, Sophie Kaplan, Mouna Mekouar, Stéphanie Saadé, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi and Philippe Van Cauteren.

PRESS

Kevin Jones, Flash Art magazine, n° 297, July-August-September, 2014

Léa Bismuth, Art Press n° 425, September 2015

Jean de Loisy, Beaux Arts magazine, June 2020

Charbel-Joseph H. Boutros is a young Lebanese artist who lives in Paris and Beirut. He was a resident at the Pavillon Neuflyze OBC at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, where he exhibited a module in 2014 and was featured in a 2015 show on the museum's roof called *Sueur d'étoile* (Star Sweat). His work, centered on a secret heart, unfolds narratives that are as enigmatic as they are poetic.

Secrets are a blind core around which knowledge gravitates. Insofar as they are abstractions charged with ineffable meaning, there is nothing that can be said about them. Marcel Duchamp conveyed this well with his "assisted ready-made" *À bruit secret* (With Hidden Noise, 1916-1964)—"A ball of twine between two brass plates, joined by four long screws, containing an unknown object added by Walter Arensberg that makes a noise when shaken. To this day I don't know what it is, nor does anyone else," he explained. The same culture of secrets is at the heart of the work of Charbel-Joseph H. Boutros, even if he has abandoned the Duchampian playing field to produce artworks endowed with an abundance of spiritual life.

This artist weaves his pieces together from three inextricable sources: his personal experiences, never to be revealed; geographical experiences—his Lebanese roots are clearly very important, as are his many trips abroad; and broader experience linked to art history and political and historical issues. For example, his piece *A Removed Stone* conjoins these three experiences.

Boutros first picked up a stone found in a forest in Lebanon he had known as a child (personal experience). Then he took it to his show at Palais de Tokyo as if it were a snippet of memory, very real testament to a particular movement (geographical experience). Finally, he put the stone back in the very same place where he found it. What does this third stage teach us? That the artwork has become an anonymous stone? Boutros explains that this stone is a kind of "reverse ready-made," since the process involved attributing the status of an artwork to an object and then returning it to its original status as an ordinary object, reclaiming its ordinariness. When the object is returned to Lebanese soil, far from any museum environment, it becomes invisible, but a change has taken place—there is a story to be told. In this artist's work the imperceptible has capital importance.

SEIZING THE IMMATERIAL

It is not the raw materials that necessarily shape his pieces. Often he leaves this essential job to other powers. The title of *The Sun Is My Only Ally* (2012) is self-explanatory: the sun does the work by revealing letters the artist silkscreened on a sheet of newsprint made in Lebanon. Yet "this same sun will end up erasing and killing the piece as it turns the written words yellow," notes this artist who like to push logics to their limits until they disappear. He is also capable of capturing night in a forest. In *Night Enclosed in Marble* (2012-unfinished), he carries a small marble suitcase to a wooded site on a moonless night. To be first opened and then shut, the suitcase

contains a space left empty to hold the night, a cubic meter of void. This capture was carried out in two Lebanese woods and the Fontainebleau forest near Paris. But what do we see before our eyes once this ritual is accomplished? Nothing but a marble block enclosing its own obscurity. Viewers are supposed to believe, or imagine, that night encased inside.

Boutros reiterated this experiment in different places around the world. This "collection of nights" that are necessarily uncollectable is part of a larger and perhaps impossible process whose aim is to reveal the intangible. He also collects traces left by sunny days on a calendar in *Days Under their Own Sun* (2013): three day sheets from the same Lebanese calendar were exposed to the sunlight in Faraya (Lebanon), Paris and Maastricht (Holland) on the corresponding days. "Each day sheet was exposed to the sun shining on that day, Monday in the Monday sun, Tuesday in the Tuesday sun... For me this was a way to emphasize the plurality of suns as against the conception of a single sun. The result is a sum of fragments in the face of a totality," Boutros recounts. Similarly, he mixed mineral water from the 28 European Union countries to make the piece *Drink Europa* (2013).

Boutros is an heir not only to the legacy of Conceptual Art (as is evident in the almost textual organization of the pieces in this exhibition) and Minimalism (the cubic shape of many of his pieces), but also to Romanticism (the theme of the night, a melancholic take on nature), appropriate enough considering the artist's own uprooting and exile from the country where he was born in 1981 amid a civil war. Thus his work is characterized by two tendencies, a very pared down and constructed aesthetics and a poetic sense of the fragilities of the soul. For instance, on two cash register receipts from a Maastricht supermarket placed side by side the first letters of the purchased products spell out a message: "MON AMOUR." The idea is disarmingly simple, and yet the result is marked by the essence of all elegance and literature. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff

Critic and independent curator Léa Bismuth's most recent show is *Documents 1929-2015* at the URDLA (paired with the 2015 Lyon Biennale / FOCUS).

«Untouched Marble». 2013. En 2013, l'artiste a fait extraire un cube de marbre d'une carrière et le préserve de tout contact humain. Il a été la première personne à toucher ce bloc de pierre qui l'a accompagné pendant un mois (atelier, vélo, bar...). In 2013, the artist had 1 cube of marble extracted from a quarry and preserve it from all human contact. He was the first person to touch this block of stone that went on to accompany him (studio, bike, room, bar...) for a period of a month.



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Friendships

ISMAÏL BAHRI

Dear Charbel,

You conceived your book the way one gathers people round a fire. Surrounding it with friends, family, and workmates. I'm touched by it because I recognize therein the emotional charge that some of your pieces have with the Other—and others. This parallel has no doubt influenced my wish to write to you.

We haven't seen one another for more than a year. The last time was at your vernissage at S.M.A.K. in Ghent, just a month before the pandemic split us all up. As I write to you today, several pieces at the exhibition come to mind, but I have naturally focused on those that were made *with* or *for* someone else. There are several. I would like to write about all of them, but I don't want to attempt too much. I prefer to concentrate on just one and spend time on it. This piece strikes a chord with me, just by its title, *Amitié* (Friendship). It is one of those that *impressed* me the most. I use the word *impressed* because that is, I believe, what your work does to me. It impresses me. It invigorates and affects my mind.

I remember that pair of Stan Smiths at the exhibition very clearly. They were quite simply placed on the floor. Their presence was both incongruous and familiar until the accompanying text prompted me to think about them differently:

Amitié, 2018

Stan Smith shoes

Two new shoes from the same pair are separated, the left one was worn by the artist during his trips in Europe for six months. The right one was worn by his friends in Beirut. The two shoes are reunited for the exhibition.

The text is laconic, but it was enough for me to make a film. I set about mentally rewinding your walk, imagining the friend in the streets of Beirut. Projecting his appearance, seeing the streets of the city in different contexts and light. Now, tell me if I'm dreaming, but I remember seeing you in Paris wearing those same white shoes. I remember this detail because I was accustomed to your elegant black shoes, your dandy-like look and I was

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astounded at seeing you wearing Stan Smiths. As far as I remember, we walked through the streets before stopping at a bar. Your shoes were silently being imprinted with the surroundings without me or anyone else being aware of it. With hindsight, I should have been more aware: I know that your pieces *work alone* and, in a way, *all the time* and *in several places at once*. They work at the heart of your daily existence, your life, without you giving the impression of being in touch with them. I'm very attached to this memory and I can't help but think that traces of that moment permeated the piece and haunted the exhibition.

When viewers read the little text beside the piece, they understand that the body that wore those shoes is made up of two people and that a translation took place: during the walk, the pair was no longer composed of the shoes but of your bodies. Once reunited in the exhibition, the two shoes represent a reunion and mentally re-form the figure of a single body. So suddenly two becomes one. The pair of friends are joined, *one* body.

Something mathematical and, more generally, scientific, becomes apparent here and, I believe, everywhere in your work. We often deal with equations that we might call esoteric, in which the imperceptible is captured through various means (shoes, shirts, marble, tears, wax, calendar pages, etc., etc.). The making of systems of belief and speculation verges on a form of fine but floating precision. Obscurity can thus be probed, a tear can be borne in symmetry with another, a pencil lead can measure itself...

In this sense, the question of doubles is present everywhere. The shoes themselves are double-sided imprints. They were imprinted on the inside by the body that wore them and on the outside by their contact with the landscapes they passed through. These shoes are sensitive interfaces between bodies and atmospheres, between bodies and landscapes. They print twin but not parallel trajectories. Understanding this, I searched for clues. I remember approaching them so as to walk around them, to examine the recesses and compare the right shoe (Beirut) with the left one (Europe). A stain, some dust, a little dirt... There was nothing to get between my teeth, there was nothing

more than worn and almost identical shoes. But hey, it probably really doesn't matter! The question of wear tells me a lot more though: now I think about it, it's not just the shoes that get transformed. The relationship with the friend also changes, I suppose. These two silent transformations go together: as the shoes wear out, the friendship changes, and as the friendship changes, the shoes wear out.

One more counterpoint—and this one particularly touches me: the two shores of the Mediterranean. The walk was done at the same time on the two shores. So, as you can imagine, this form of ubiquity only makes me dream, because, in a certain fashion, you cancel out your endless comings and goings between Lebanon and Europe. This oscillating movement that gives cadence to your life seems to find a form and become *fixed* in this work. These shoes are markers of horizons, buoys out at sea. So, when I saw the two shoes paired together again at the S.M.A.K., I saw two horizons reunited. I saw the gap narrowed, the distance retracted onto itself and *placed there*, at rest.

Of course, it's not that simple and I'm getting carried away. Because if the recreated pair unites the two shores and suggests a unified body, the latter nevertheless remain invisible, absent, elsewhere. In *Amitié*, there are two stages: the walk and the exhibition. During the walk, shoes were worn but separated. At the S.M.A.K., they were brought together but your bodies were absent. And, as often occurs in your work, the counterpoint was lacking. The other, the elsewhere, functions like a deported shadow, like a double projecting itself elsewhere, in space as in time.

I realize, as I write to you, that the conceptual activation of your work often arises out of a form of *incompleteness*. This incompleteness prods mental potentials into action, and stokes our minds with possible speculations and beliefs. And, beyond the works considered separately, it is the whole S.M.A.K. exhibition that is haunted by absent counterpoints. The exhibition itself has its doubles and multiple elsewhere. And if ubiquity is conceptual, absence haunts and remains.

Tunis and Paris, May 2021

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When Seeing (or Not Seeing) Is Believing

JEAN-MARIE GALLAIS

In 2005, John Scheid, the archaeologist who specializes in ancient Roman religion, published an essay titled *Quand faire, c'est croire* (When Doing Is Believing), which analyzed the sacrificial rites of the Romans.¹ It restored the reputation of the Roman religion that had been devalued by the prejudices of historians whose regard had been long distorted by Christian dogma. Scheid demonstrated that, though it knew nothing of the notion of revelation and was lacking in beliefs, it was through "doing"—rites and ritual obligations—that this religion forcefully took shape. I have often thought about this title—When Doing Is Believing—and its remarkable force and concision. When I was invited to write about the work of Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, my first intuition, without it being really being clear to me why, was to think once again about this book and title, but by antonymy: by proposing the principle of intangible mystery and belief as opposed to rite and action.² Indeed, in the work of H. Boutros, the ritual part, the doing, is almost exclusively performed by the artist (and sometimes the institution), and this process of creation, however crucial it may be, is knowingly very limited and even undocumented. It remains for the viewer to look upon or imagine what he cannot see, to rouse all his senses. Or almost: *Noli me tangere*—touch is seldom called upon. The viewer must believe, without ever doing: believe the artist, his actions, his words, without the ability to verify their veracity. However, nothing obliges him to accept this condition, the visit to the exhibition is a permanent negotiation between the work, the viewer, and the absent artist.

This negotiation, which will undoubtedly irritate some because it's tied up with the idea one might have about a work of art, first concerns the materials by which the eye is confronted. Charbel-joseph H. Boutros's work is indeed composed of a family of natural and artificial materials of restricted palette but rich in delicate nuances—whites, beiges, grays, and blacks dominate—and with multiple connotations—earth, stone, paper, fabric, carpet, powders (salt, sugar), water, metal, wax . . . Most of these materials are malleable, their forms and properties may vary with alteration of the atmosphere or exposure to light, without manual intervention, without "doing." Some have a very fleeting lifespan, drawing the work towards its inevitable extinction, while others, on the contrary, are synonymous with durability,

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such as Carrara marble. As the first clue of a mystery to be deciphered, the material nature of the works is further revealed by reading the accompanying label or short text written by the artist. The specificity of the elements may contribute to the definition of these materials: H. Boutros is not interested in liquid in itself as an element but rather that this one is water from the Mediterranean and that one water from the Atlantic Ocean, or that this is a mixture of the mineral waters from the twenty-seven countries of the European Union, or that one the tears of his gallerist. Earth takes on meaning if it has come from his family's garden in Lebanon; stone if it has been taken from a specific location; and wax only confers its power on works because it is votive, taken from churches and accompanied by devout individual and anonymous prayers.

The object by which our gaze is confronted is never simply ready-made. Beyond its materiality, it is *charged*, as may be said of certain African ritual statues, or *functionally symbolic*, a term specific to Surrealist sculptures, and yet H. Boutros' works have little in common with either the former or latter. They are more readily compared to a conceptual art that has renounced its radicalism or dryness in favor of feeling, symbol, and dream. Charbel-joseph H. Boutros harnesses the tangible and distinct condition of an essence: the definition of the philosophical principle of haecceity ("thisness"). This blanket, this piece of paper and this garment are used in his creation because, beyond their appearance, they have something invisible that distinguishes them from those that are similar. Perhaps it has to do with the way the work was produced. Often, it is an element of the artist's personal history that makes the work's component individual rather than generic: the blanket comes from his childhood, this shirt belonged to his father, that one to his grandfather, and so on. The personal then touches on the political—we will come back to that. Sometimes H. Boutros conducts experiments with a didactic air, as when he orders two identical marble blocks to be cut but chooses to differentiate them by spending a month constantly with one of the pair, which has not been touched by man. This block, unlike its "standard" fellow-block exhibited alongside, has therefore been imbued with an experience: extracted by a gloved stonemason,

it then never left the artist: it accompanied him on his Dutch bike, it went to the cinema and the restaurant, it slept with him, etc.

This principle of haecceity naturally infers that the immaterial component is essential. The work *Souffles d'artistes* (2015–20) directly cites—though transforming it—a historical piece by the Italian artist Piero Manzoni, an exalter of the dematerialization of art, who blew air into a balloon and exhibited it. Shifted into the plural form, the title implies that the work is no longer an individual creation but a combination of the breath of two artists who share art as well as life: the pair that Charbel-joseph H. Boutros forms with Stéphanie Saadé. The contents of the balloon will eventually blend with the surrounding air, thereby becoming one with the atmosphere of the exhibition's visitors. Part of H. Boutros's work consists in percolating reality so as to disrupt it in an *infrathin* manner.³ Evaporation, absorption, and capillarity are active, physical phenomena, both literally and metaphorically, that may also propound phantom geopolitics and find pragmatic applications—the artist sending out a daily flow of subliminal messages. In different countries, it may happen that H. Boutros will regularly visit the same supermarket, buy some goods and pass through the checkout repeatedly until the moment the cash machine prints out a receipt of which the first letters of each line form the acrostic "mon amour." This sterile ticket bears witness to a poetic attempt to communicate love amid consumption. Once the receipt has been elevated to the rank of an artwork, its exposure to light inevitably leads the romance to a tragic end, the ink and paper being programmed with obsolescence. Did the cashier even sense that something unusual was taking place with this strange customer?

Fragility is another recurring component in his work. The fragility of matter, of love, of art. Above all, this pact of trust demanded of the visitor is especially fragile: the latter is free to think that, for his part, the artist may have "cheated," that his conceit is nothing but an arrogant post-conceptual posture and that the intangible elements linked with the materials are pure invention. At the entrance to the exhibition, H. Boutros places a few works in an area he calls "the threshold of trust." From the moment the visitor crosses this zone, the mysterious logic

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is accepted. The first works announce the volatility of their meaning: all that remains is to believe in it all, to get caught up in the game and to allow yourself to be transported by the exhibition. This feeling of fragility is linked with the contradictory or utopian idea of "grasping the imperceptible." Incidentally, isn't that what every artist tries to do, somewhere or other? How is it possible to capture and preserve a memory?⁴ A past emotion? A feeling? A fragment of eternity? Sunlight hits the paper and changes its color, the plant turns toward the light: tiny details and variations that act and create new territories. Several works by Charbel-joseph H. Boutros enclose something in hollows, swellings, holes, shadowy areas where the unknown dwells. Essences are sealed. For example, tubes of insulating material shield hollows two meters long from sound, heat, and light, like portions of darkness, emptiness, inner abstraction: the unbeliever has his back to the wall, for if he wants to confirm the presence of this hollow, he would make it vanish without even being able to see it.

The most emblematic series of works that operate on this principle is the *Night Enclosed in Marble*, begun in 2012. H. Boutros had polished marble blocks cut in two and hinged together, with at their heart a perfectly hermetic void cut out measuring one cubic centimeter. At specific moments of the calendar and alone, he visited selected symbolic places on a moonless night, opened the block and waited, giving the darkness the time to fill the cavity. He then closed the block, and took this nocturnal memory from exhibition to exhibition, ensuring that the hinge was never allowed to open, at the risk of losing the night. Returning to the ancient conception that the night is a substance that surrounds us, with this series H. Boutros created a collection of nights. Some are linked to personal memories, such as those culled from the Qadisha Valley ("Qadisha" is Syriac for "holy"), a remote place in Lebanon where those seeking faith or protection have taken refuge since ancient times. Marble would seem to portend an eternity but it remains vulnerable because it is entirely dependent on the precautions taken and care lavished on the work by those who come into contact with it: viewers, transporters, exhibition organizers, customs officers, collectors, etc. If the night is a major theme in the work of H. Boutros, as a motif,

material, or component of creation, it is partly so because it represents—a bit like a forest or water, but in a more absolute and imprecise way at the same time—that state that the artist seeks: a conceptual abstraction, a feeling of floating, given by a space that is no longer really defined (the night makes the horizon line vanish, doing away with any Euclidean perspective), a temporality transformed by the absence of landmarks, by sleep and dreams, a moment when pure colors disappear to leave room for nuances. This somewhat cosmic envelopment is in places combined with the time of civilization, as in the video *No Light in White Light* (2014), shot ten minutes before sunset in Naas Forest in Lebanon. A priest reads the Book of Genesis in Syriac, an Aramaic language whose origins date back to Antiquity and whose existence is threatened with extinction but maintained by the Christian cult in the East. However, nightfall gets the upper hand, reading becomes impossible and, like the language, the text gradually disappears as it evokes creation. The sacred word fades in the darkness.

No Light in White Light is actually a generic title that groups several types of works. Among these are *Night Cartographies* (2011–ongoing), on which, using black spray-paint, the artist marks the time that he sleeps on a timescale, such that each work portrays sleep as a "black hole" in our lives. The pigment powder delicately accumulates, without clear demarcation, and without contact or clear-cut gesture, gradually erasing the white of the paper. Packed together in covers, the cartographies are only awoken when displayed. For the rest of the time, they remain shrouded in darkness, asleep. Another typology subsumed under this title brings together sculptures made of sleeping masks, which H. Boutros collects during long-haul flights. After wearing them for several nights, he freezes them with their memories and dreams by coating them with votive wax. The list of materials used to make the sculpture includes the word "wishes": the wax comes from candles that H. Boutros steals from his village church in Lebanon, with the complicity of his mother. It is important to him that the wax used is invested with a wish, that it is a vehicle for a desire for change.

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Night returns us to eternity and the universal, as much as it is a symbol of the present. In the vocabulary of Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, two related words often come up: geography and cartography. Whereas geology voyages through time, geography is a science of the present, and anchored in the Earth. By mapping it, the night becomes as much a place as a temporality. This relationship with the territory is linked with Lebanon and its history, a land of exiles, given rhythm by his departures and sometimes impossible returns in accordance with its conflicts (the Lebanese war marked the artist's childhood) and political wanderings. Moving a stone and bringing it back, removing a clod of earth from the country and presenting it levitating outside the borders, and taking possession of prayers are all acts that echo the recent history and geopolitics of the Middle East. The plaintive work of H. Boutros balances on a thread strung between personal and collective history, the self-reflexivity of art, and faith in the superiority of the creative act. Running counter to mathematical precision and science, even if it does not disown all logic, the work of Charbel-joseph H. Boutros is like the night or love—mysterious, gentle, and demanding; to give oneself up to it completely, you have to believe in its magical and sacred character. Like Orpheus, it's a question of not looking back.

1. John Scheid, *Quand faire, c'est croire* (Paris: Aubier, 2005).
2. Revival and inversion, repurposing, are recurrent actions in the work of Charbel-joseph H. Boutros; we might perhaps find in them a hint of an explanation, a sort of transmittal of methods.
3. "When tobacco smoke smells also of the mouth of the person who exhaled it, the two smells marry through infrathin." Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Thomas Girst, Luke Frost, *The Duchamp Dictionary* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014).
4. On this, from a Western perspective, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (New York: Random House, 2014).

Practical information

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